



# TACOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## CITY OF DESTINY NEWSLETTER

[www.TacomaHistory.org](http://www.TacomaHistory.org)

Donation \$2

SPRING 2021

Tacoma, Washington

### Historical Society presents annual honors

Marking its 31st year, Tacoma Historical Society has honored a local author, a heritage organization, and an exceptional volunteer with its 2021 annual awards.

**Tamiko Kimura** received the society's **Murray Morgan Award** for her research and writing that led to her 2020 biography and oral history of civil rights champion Rosa Franklin. Here she is pictured with former State Senator Franklin. Franklin was the first



African American woman to be elected to serve in the WA State Senate, and the first African American to serve as Senate President Pro Tem. (The Franklin biography is available for purchase in the THS Museum Gift Shop.)

She also recently co-authored the graphic novel, "We Hereby Refuse: Japanese American Resistance to Wartime Incarceration." It is available online and at King's Books.



The society's **Alan C. Liddle Award** went to a kindred heritage organization, **Historic Tacoma**, for its role in highlighting and advocating for Tacoma's treasury of historic architecture.



Historic Tacoma's board president Kathleen Brooker accepted the award on behalf of Historic Tacoma. The organization is the lead organization in Tacoma working for the recognition and reuse of our city's historic places and connecting people with preservation resources. It empowers supporters and community members to become active partners in saving Tacoma's architectural heritage.

Recognizing her exceptional volunteer service to Tacoma Historical Society, **Shelly Waldron** was the recipient of the **Ronald E. Magden Award**.

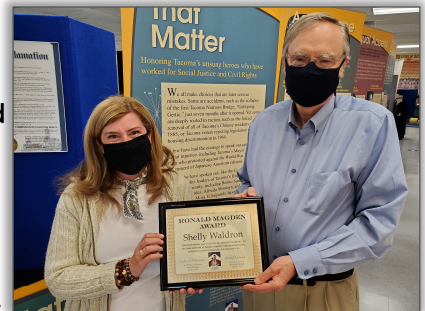
During this past year, Shelly has continued her active service to THS as an active museum docent, providing assistance with the maintenance of the THS collections database, and volunteering on fundraising projects. Her positive and friendly customer service skills are superb.

Here's what Shelly had to say about why she chooses to share her time and talents with us:

*"I enjoy volunteering at the Tacoma Historical Society Museum because not only is it fun, but it is also interesting to learn about and then share Tacoma's rich history with others."*

For a full list of past award recipients, go to

[www.tacomahistory.org/awards](http://www.tacomahistory.org/awards)



### Inside ...

Furniture Manufacturing in Tacoma .....	Page 3
2020 Annual Appeal Donors .....	Page 4
Clayton's Memories: Early Tacoma Remembered .....	Page 8
Explore Tacoma History with Books & Trivia .....	Page 12



Brought to you with the support of Tacoma Creates and THS members.

## The Rest is History . . .

By Bill Baarsma, President of the Board

I read with keen interest Edward Echtle's feature article in this edition: Furniture Manufacturing in Tacoma: A Thumbnail History (from History Link) because, as it turns out, there is a direct family connection. Let me explain:

In 1925 Henry and Margaret Baarsma arrived in Tacoma from Lexington, Kentucky with their two boys, Clarence and Gerald, so that Henry could accept a position with Gregory Furniture Manufacturing. Henry was a skilled furniture maker having honed his craft in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where Clarence, my dad, and Gerald were born.

Henry rose through the ranks of the company and soon became superintendent of the plant—one of the largest in the country at the time. The Baarsma family lived the good life as members of the Tacoma Yacht Club, owners of a 36-foot cabin cruiser and a new Cord automobile. Clarence dropped out of Stadium HS to join the company and became a shop foreman.

In 1936, Henry and Margaret moved to California where a better and even higher paying job awaited. The following year, Clarence married Constance Alice Smith at St. Andrews Episcopal Church. Soon, they followed Henry and Margaret south settling in Los Angeles.

The Great Depression hit and the Baarsmas struggled. Sensing the "winds of war" on the horizon, Clarence, known as Clary, and Constance, known as Connie, returned to Tacoma in 1941.

Clary, feeling he would be soon be drafted, wanted his spouse to be close to her parents who lived in Seattle at the time. One year later their only child was born. And, as they say, the rest is history.



## Historically Speaking . . .

From Michael Lafreniere, THS Director

*"To me, this is about preserving history and making it available to everyone."* - Sergey Brin, 47-year-old Russian-American computer scientist and Google co-founder.

This quote prompts one to ask, is Google (and other modern day search engines) the new museum? Has the Internet itself become the final repository of all knowledge and humanity's shared cultural history?

These questions arose recently after reading that the Louvre's entire art collection is now accessible online. Forget tickets to Paris, and the long lines ... you can now take free virtual tours in 3D of what some have called the world's art museum.

Like many organizations, the staff and volunteers at Tacoma Historical Society have endeavored to adapt to these pandemic times to make Tacoma history even more accessible through a variety of new program formats and platforms. As technology continues to impact a wide range of museum operations, it does beg the question of what a local history museum will look like in 10 years. What are the most effective ways to keep Tacoma's history alive. Is it best achieved through a classic bricks-and-mortar building? Or is it a mission increasingly better and more sustainably served through virtual spaces and online experiences? How do we educate, conserve and protect Tacoma history in the Age of Google? It is a subject that staff and some board members have begun to explore recently. What are your thoughts?

For now, we're still here. So stop by the museum in late-July to see our newest exhibit: **Timber Town - Tacoma's Lumber History.**

Be well. Make history.



## City of Destiny Newsletter

Published by

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## Furniture Manufacturing in Tacoma: A Thumbnail History

By Edward Echtle (for HistoryLink.org)

*This article is kindly shared here courtesy of HistoryLink.org ... all information sources for the article can be found at [www.historylink.org/File/20518](http://www.historylink.org/File/20518)*

Furniture manufacturing was a key industry in Tacoma for nearly a century. By the late nineteenth century much of the Pierce County city's economy was built on the lumber industry. The availability of processed wood materials, tied with a growing regional demand for finished products and access to shipping by both rail and sea, led to Tacoma's development as a center for furniture manufacture. Through the decades many significant furniture factories came and went, for a time making Tacoma the largest furniture-manufacturing center west of the Mississippi River. However, by the late twentieth century, outsourcing, imports, and deindustrialization led to the decline of Tacoma's furniture-manufacturing industry. In recent years, a return to small-scale custom production by craftspeople echoes the industry's early days.

### New Tacoma

In the early years of American settlement in Washington, people procured furnishings in three main ways: They brought furniture with them, built it themselves, or ordered it from the eastern United States. By the late 1850s, woodworkers in the area operated small-scale businesses making furniture to order, but there was little in the way of manufacturing. One of the earliest manufacturers on Puget Sound was T. B. Speek, who established a chair-making business at Tumwater Falls near Olympia in the 1860s. While the factory was short lived, its simple dowel chairs were ubiquitous in Western Washington in the early days, and many still survive in museums.

Several factors led to Tacoma's eventual emergence as a furniture-manufacturing center. As more lumber mills began operating around Puget Sound, ancillary businesses such as planing mills sprang up, to refine raw wood products into marketable goods. The availability of planed lumber was a key development that made wooden furniture manufacture in the region possible. Finally, the arrival of the Northern Pacific Railway at Commencement Bay in 1873 made New Tacoma (as the railroad called the town it built a short distance south of the existing small settlement of Tacoma) a hub of shipping activity for raw materials and manufactured goods.

To fend off land speculators, the Tacoma Land Company, a subsidiary of the Northern Pacific, sold land only to those who intended to develop it and required buyers to submit their plans for approval. From the

1870s to the early 1900s the Tacoma Land Company steered industrial development to the area near its wharf, along Pacific Avenue from 15th Street southward, paralleling what later became the Thea Foss Waterway. A sawmill and foundry were among the first to locate in the area, as well as warehouses and wholesale businesses to distribute incoming goods.

The earliest furniture manufacturer in the Tacoma area was Gustave G. Bresemann (1845-1937), who immigrated from Prussia in 1869 and arrived in Pierce County by 1870 at age 25. A carpenter and woodworker by trade, Bresemann acquired the Byrd Sawmill at Steilacoom Lake in 1871. Bresemann, with partner August Burow (1837-1906), soon began making furniture, the first such factory in Pierce County. By 1876 Bresemann relocated to Spanaway Lake, building a new water-powered sawmill and continuing his furniture-making business. Bresemann Forest on the north shore of Spanaway Lake is named for him.

In Tacoma, David S. Lister Sr. (1821-1891) established a foundry in 1876 and added furniture manufacturing to his business soon after. By 1881 the growing furniture operation was run by Frederick Bauerle (1841-1926) in partnership with John A. Muller (1843-1926) and known as the Tacoma Furniture Factory. This factory changed hands in 1883, bought by James Chamberlain and Stuart Rice (1858-1938). Among the more refined pieces it produced was a roll-top desk. By 1885 the factory employed 40 workers.

After selling his first factory, Bauerle founded Bauerle and Klee with Joseph Klee (1845-1927) in 1888. In 1889 Gustave Bresemann sold his factory at Spanaway Lake and began a partnership with Klee, buying out Bauerle in a new factory at 25th and H streets in Tacoma. Bresemann managed operations until his retirement in 1902; the factory operated until at least 1906.

### Boom Years

The story of furniture making in Tacoma is complex due to the shifting demands of markets and the overlap of skill sets and equipment with other industries such as residential millwork, cabinet making, boat building, and commercial-fixture manufacturing. As demand increased, businesses in these industries sometimes added furniture to their product lines and, just as quickly, ended production when demand waned. Because of this, there were many furniture manufacturers in Tacoma that lasted only a short time. But a number of larger companies endured for decades, some for more than a century.

Among the city's earliest large furniture concerns was F. S. Harmon and Company, organized by Fremont Smith Harmon (1856-1936) in 1882. Harmon arrived in

*(Continued on page 4)*

## Furniture Manufacturing in Tacoma

*(Continued from page 3)*

Tacoma from Wisconsin in 1882 with experience in furniture sales. Initially he partnered with Alexander Parker (1826-1901) in Parker's existing retail business. Harmon bought Parker out after a fire destroyed their store in 1884. Afterward he transitioned to wholesale furniture supply. To keep up with demand F. S. Harmon and Company purchased the Tacoma Furniture Factory in 1889. Harmon became a leading mattress and furniture supplier throughout the Pacific Northwest, opening branches in Portland in 1904 and Seattle and Spokane in 1909. Also in 1909, construction of the Northern Pacific's new Union Station displaced Harmon's factory. He built a substantial new factory and warehouse across the street at 1938 Pacific Avenue, signaling the firm's importance in the city's and the region's economy.

Another new arrival was Joseph L. Carman (1861-1938), who came to Tacoma in 1889 from Des Moines, Iowa, specifically to found a mattress company. He purchased the recently organized L. S. Wood and Company and began the Pacific Lounge and Mattress Company in 1891 with partners L. S. Wood and Fred J. Kelly. It was the first mattress factory in Washington. By 1895 Carman built a new four-story plant at 25th Street and McKinley Avenue despite a nationwide economic downturn. In 1903 Pacific Lounge and Mattress became Carman Manufacturing, Inc.

Tacoma's furniture-manufacturing concerns went through a prolonged growth period prior to World War I. Among the new concerns were the West Coast Chair Company, established in 1904; the Northwest Chair Company, established 1914; and the Kronlund Furniture and Manufacturing Company, established in 1917. Kronlund became Restmore in 1928. Restmore is notable for its patented innerspring mattress design, which it later sold to Simmons Manufacturing Company of Kenosha, Wisconsin.

A recent arrival from New York, George W. Slyter (1862-1946), began the Washington Parlor Furniture Company in 1905. This concern grew rapidly enough to need larger quarters by 1909 when it built a new 75,000-square-foot plant on 11th Street. It produced mainly upholstered living-room furniture along with furnishings for lodges and churches.

One of Tacoma's largest furniture concerns began in 1916 when Edwin Gregory (1862-1937) organized Gregory Furniture Manufacturing Company. Gregory was born in New York and apprenticed as a cabinet maker. He opened his first shop in his home state but lost it to a fire and decided to begin again on the West Coast. In 1889 he arrived in Tacoma and opened Standard House Furniture, a retail business that operated until 1920. The Gregory factory at 2126 S Steele Street, adjacent to

the Northern Pacific tracks, was originally built in 1908 for the Willamette Casket Company. By the 1920s Gregory's output was primarily walnut, oak, and mahogany dining- and living-room furnishings, with sales spanning the United States.

By the end of World War I, news articles declared Tacoma the leading manufacturer of furniture on the West Coast, out-producing larger cities including Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco. By then, the industrial area had expanded, first to the east along 25th and 26th streets, and then southwest toward South Tacoma along the Northern Pacific right of way. In addition, dredging and filling in the Puyallup River estuary expanded the industrial area east of downtown. In each of these areas, furniture manufacturers intermingled with other wood-products industries, including barrel makers, architectural millworks, and cabinet manufacturers.

However, a postwar economic slump led to a contraction in the furniture market. Despite the downturn, there was enough demand for home furnishings to prompt some new entries into the field. In 1924 the long-established Buffelen Mill diversified into furniture manufacturing. Dutch immigrant John J. Buffelen (1864-1941) had arrived in Tacoma in 1901 and went into business making decorative porch columns for residential construction. In 1913 another mill came up for sale on Tacoma's tide flats; Buffelen purchased it and established the Buffelen Lumber and Manufacturing Company, producing doors, moldings, and decorative veneers before also moving into furniture making.

A major shift in the local industry was the restructuring of F. S. Harmon and Company in the late 1930s. As Fremont Harmon's health declined, his family decided to sell off the furniture-manufacturing arm of the business. It was purchased by Alan T. Crutcher (1884-1947) and Joseph H. Kitlar (1903-1988) who planned to expand its furniture-production division. In 1936 Harmon died, and Crutcher and Kitlar acquired the remainder of the company. For the moment its bread and butter remained mattresses made under franchise from Serta Sleeper Associates of Chicago. It employed 300 workers, making it the second-largest mattress manufacturer in the West. However, it quietly began its move toward expanding its output of home furnishings.

## Homefront World War II

As the United States edged toward entry into World War II, Tacoma's proximity to major military facilities at Fort Lewis and the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard positioned its industries to play a significant role in the war effort. In 1941, Tacoma's furniture manufacturers

*(Continued on page 5)*



## Furniture Manufacturing in Tacoma

*Continued from page 4)*

had a combined \$1 million payroll with more than 1,200 workers in 20 different plants. After the U.S. entered the conflict at the end of that year, furniture factories in Tacoma supplied pieces for bases across the country, in Europe, and around the Pacific Rim.

Nationwide, the demographics of workers changed as draft-age white men left manufacturing jobs to join the military, women, minorities, and older workers filled the gap. One high-profile example was the Junior Line Furniture Company. Founded in Seattle in 1922, Junior Line made cribs, bassinets, and related items. In 1941 a major fire destroyed its factory, prompting the company's relocation to Tacoma when it was unable to find new quarters in Seattle. Production resumed in Junior Line's new location at 1017 East D Street with a nearly all-woman workforce of 25. By late 1942 owner-manager Clifford C. Collins (1903-1984) extolled the advantages of women workers, noting their eagerness to learn and listen and that they "never make the same mistake twice" ("Tacoma Plant Running ...").

Other Tacoma manufacturers took on defense contracts in addition to furniture making. F. S. Harmon added fabrication of aluminum seat frames for Boeing aircraft and metal bunk beds for the army. Buffelen also produced seats for Boeing. By 1943 the Northwest Chair Company, the largest chair manufacturer in the West, made wooden bodies for military supply trucks used in Europe and the Pacific. Like Junior Line, Northwest Chair also employed many women in all parts of production, including installing truck bodies. In an interview one manager said, "The man who says women are not naturally mechanically inclined is as out of date as a moustache cup" (Simmons, "First of Wooden Truck Bodies ..."). By 1944 Northwest Chair made 45 different wooden parts for use in Boeing B-17 and B-29 bombers.

### "Grand Rapids of the West"

After the war, service men and women returned to an economy much improved since the 1930s. In 1945 local newspapers reported that the finished-wood-products trades in Tacoma, including furniture manufacturing, supported 1,880 workers. By 1946, 17 furniture factories turned out a diverse array of products made of wood, metal, and plastic. Tacoma's furniture manufacturers were optimistic that the new postwar affluence would translate into increased sales as families bought homes. Industry advocates attributed Tacoma's continued dominance of the region's furniture industry to its long history of abundant raw materials, ease of shipping, and inexpensive water and power utilities. By the late 1940s industry leaders called Tacoma "The Grand Rapids of the West," tying its image in the minds of investors to the Michigan city's famous late-

nineteenth-century furniture boom.

Expansion of F. S. Harmon and Company's wood-furnishing division took a major step in late 1945 when Harmon purchased the Gregory Furniture Manufacturing plant. As Gregory's sales waned it downsized, relocating to new quarters at 3321 S Union Avenue and resuming production as the Gregory-Butler Furniture Manufacturing Company. Gregory-Butler's new building featured a modern production line and focused on smaller production runs of high-quality solid wood home furnishings.

Harmon's wood-products production relocated from its Pacific Avenue site to the former Gregory plant, allowing expansion of the mattress-manufacturing division at 1953 South C Street. By 1950 Harmon was the second-largest manufacturer in America and specialized in medium price-range bedroom suites and wood dining-room sets. To address changing tastes, it also added production of chrome and laminate dinettes under a franchise from the Virginia House brand.

Harmon also acquired a long-established local manufacturer, the Northwestern Woodenware Company, a producer of wooden butter tubs and shipping barrels in Tacoma since 1902. Competition from new paper and cardboard packaging made Northwestern Woodenware's original business obsolete. In 1945 new managers retooled its factory at 1933 Dock Street for production of unfinished fir furniture including benches, tables, light bookcases, and other items. Harmon bought the factory in 1948 to add a line of lower-priced products to its offerings.

From 1946 into the 1950s, Junior Line retained its majority-female workforce. As other companies pressured wartime hires to "make way" for family men, the press questioned manager Cliff Collins on his decision to continue employing women. Collins maintained women were preferential to men, stating, "For the most part we've found women to be steadier workers, more dependable, neater, and (of all things), less temperamental" ("Boss Likes Gals' Work") Collins also noted that some of his female hires supported spouses who were veterans with disabilities from their wartime service.

As business grew, production increased along with the number of products Junior Line offered, including high chairs, playpens, and changing dressers. In 1952 Junior Line added to its holdings a sawmill located in the Cascade foothills, to provide a committed supply of wood. At the height of its business in 1957, Junior Line employed 100 workers and produced 2,500 items per week.

Small-scale mattress manufacturer Restmore also benefitted from the postwar economic boom. By 1945 it too needed larger quarters and relocated to 1541

*(Continued on page 10)*



## TACOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

wishes to thank our

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185 donors gave a total of \$31,145.00, 156% of targeted goal.\*

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## Clayton's Memories: Early-day Tacoma remembered as a busy, pleasant place

*Clayton Rubidge was born in Tacoma in 1902 and lived here all his life. His recollections give us a look at the city at the time. A lifelong Tacoman, Clayton Rubidge dictated his memories about the Tacoma of his boyhood to Joan Hokanson Harelson an unknown number of years ago. In 2015 she sent the memoir to Harry Hokanson. He in turn sent it to his longtime friend Jack Falskow. We're indebted to Jack for sending it to his former colleague at the College of Puget Sound, Tacoma Historical Society Board Vice-President Dale Wirsing who edited the memoir for this publication.*

In turn-of-the century Tacoma people built their homes along the streetcar line. There is an unverified report that the streetcar went down Washington, then up 31st Street to Proctor. There were some tall trees in the area but no woods. Clayton remembered a grove of slim fir trees behind their house. The house in those days had white boards with a wide porch around the front and side, and a garden sloping down in the back.

Washington School was being built at the time when Clayton was a small child (ca. 1900). His sister Alvina was graduating from Lowell School (the 8th grade) and Clayton's mother was invited to attend. The 4- or 5-year-old Clayton was left with a neighbor, and given a nickel and told he could go to the grocery store at 30th and Washington and buy a piece of candy. A wooden sidewalk was bordered by a very high fence. On this hot June day, Clayton clambered up to walk along the top of the fence. He fell off and broke his leg. To keep his leg in a firm position for mending, he was made to sit with bags of sand supporting his leg. He remembered that this sand came from the building site at Washington School.

The 26th and Proctor shopping and business district was already established in Clayton's childhood, with Washington School, Beall's Florists (with greenhouses and an office), Mrs. Coleman's Bakery, the Paramount Theater and the Proctor Theater, and a grocery store. Clayton recalls the rumble of flat cars on the streetcar line bringing wood at night to Anderson's wood yard at 27th and Proctor. The wood, in 4-foot lengths, was cut into 16-inch pieces and sold as firewood. Homes were heated either by coal or wood, and some had central heating.

One day the principal of Washington School came into the classroom and told the children not to go home across the Union Avenue Bridge because it had collapsed. That was in 1914 or 1915. Near there, at the end of 31st Street, in the gulch, was a gravel pit. Clayton remembers walking past it when he and the neighborhood children went down to the bay to swim. In the winter, if there was snow, they would slide down Proctor Street and over the bridge.

### Clayton Rubidge's family

*Genealogy research by THS volunteer, Deb Freedman*

Clayton's Grandfather Rubidge: Walter Boswell Rubidge, youngest son of Charles and Margaret Rubidge, born July 27, 1827, at Otonabee near Peterborough, Canada West.

Grandmother Rubidge: Henrietta Ann Marter, eldest daughter of Peter Augustos Marter, born March 17, 1835, at Brantford in the Gore district, Canada. She bore ten children between the years 1853 and 1876.

Clayton's father, William Harry Cameron Rubidge, was the sixth child, born 1864. At the time he came west, people were relocating in great numbers to the Puget Sound area. Every day, trains brought more newcomers to the Puget Sound area.

Clayton's mother, Birdie, was born in Chicago. Her father, William Asa Parker, born in Machias, Maine, was a sea captain. Grandmother Parker died quite early, and perhaps that is when father and daughter moved to Tacoma, along with Uncle James. Captain Parker brought with him a substantial library of books and bound volumes of pre-Civil War *Harper's Magazine*. The family lived at first on I street, and later the captain lived with Clayton's mother and father on Washington Street until his death in 1904.

Clayton's mother played the organ at Trinity Episcopal Church. Might she have met her husband at church? They were married in 1897 and initially lived on North 1st and Tacoma Ave. In 1900, Clayton's father bought the house on Washington Street, which had been built by a Mr. Hopping in

In 1890 the streetcar line went all the way to Point Defiance Park. North 45th and Orchard was Poor Man's Corner. It cost 5 cents to get that far, but if you wanted to ride all the way to the park, you had to pay 5 cents more.



"Allen C. Mason completed the Point Defiance Line trolley system in 1890, later selling it to Tacoma Railway & Power Co. The car stopped at North 45th and Orchard Streets where passengers were required to pay a second nickel to continue on to Point Defiance Park. The stop became known as "Poor Man's Corner" as many riders departed there and walked to the park to save a nickel." (Photo & description courtesy Tacoma Public Library Digital Collection)

One year Clayton visited his aunts in Steilacoom, where they were renting a house from Dr. McCutcheon,

*(Continued on page 9)*



## Clayton's Memories

(Continued from page 8)

on a hill overlooking the Sound. The aunts were two of his father's sisters. The household included the husband of one of them, and a cousin, who had come from Winnipeg in 1909. To get to Steilacoom Clayton and his mother took the streetcar to downtown. Then they transferred to the cable car that made a loop from A Street, up 11th to K street, over to 13th and down again to A. When they reached 11th and K, they transferred to the streetcar to Steilacoom. It was powered by electricity. and by the time it was approaching Steilacoom from Chambers Creek, it was running out of power, so just before it went up the last hill from Chambers Creek, everyone but the children and the elderly had to get out and walk up to the terminal.

It was an easy-going life in those days. Milk was delivered by horse. The milkman would walk beside the cart and the horse knew where to stop. The grocers would go round in the morning and take orders, returning with the goods later in the day. A bread truck would come by, and also a vegetable truck.

Around the houses there was less lawn. There were lots of roses, and few rhododendrons, only the wild variety brought in from the woods. In those days many people raised chickens, and some had cows or horses. Cows were pastured at the College of Puget Sound.

Clayton's father worked in the hardware business, for the Hunt-Mottet Company. The company tried to make the employees as happy as they could -- without paying them too much. They must have been given a week's vacation in summer, since Clayton remembered several outings with his father and mother.

One excursion was by boat, to Arletta. They took the streetcar downtown, walked to the wharf, then took the steamer for three hours to a country inn at Arletta, near Fox Island. There the owner of the inn, a Mr. Powell, took people ashore in his rowboat. Clayton remembers his rather stout mother being unhappy about getting into the rocking little rowboat.

When Clayton was about six years old the family went to stay at Mesler's near the Mount Rainier National Park entrance. They took the train from the Tacoma Eastern Depot, on 26th and Pacific (later the Milwaukee Station). At Ashford they got into an open carriage and were taken to Mesler's, where they stayed with other summer boarders for a few days. Clayton and his father took the carriage one day to Longmire, where they stayed overnight, and then went on horseback to Paradise, to Reese's Camp, which was a large tent. Clayton remembers sitting at table, family-style, with James Longmire at the head.

Crowds of people rode the streetcar to Point Defiance Park on fine Sundays. Ice cream was delivered from the Olympic Ice Cream Co. by boat to the Pavilion for the ice

cream stands. At the stands people made their own cones with a hot iron press. People went bathing, not swimming; they had picnics, rental boats, and bought ice cream cones.

Over the century the climate has been changing. Clayton remembers his mother saying she hoped the snowballs (the bush) would be out by Memorial Day. Nowadays they are long gone by the end of May. The boys and girls used to skate on the pond in Wright Park, and on Snake Lake.

During Clayton's childhood downtown Tacoma's streets were paved. He recalls crowds milling around, and the stores full of people. Union Station was built in 1911. It replaced a wooden structure. Indians came down from British Columbia to pick hops in the Puyallup Valley. They would also sit on the corner of 11th and Broadway and sell baskets.

People traveled to Seattle by boat. Boats left every two hours and took about 1 hour and 45 minutes to reach Seattle. The *Flyer*, the best known ship, did four round trips a day at 18 miles an hour. The *Tacoma* was another well-loved boat.

Clayton's uncle had a dog, Bosun, who walked by himself to the streetcar (the traction line), jumped on when it slowed down at a corner near Tacoma Avenue and went downtown, where he spent the day going up and down in an elevator in a department store.

Clayton attended Washington School for eight years, and then Stadium High School. He also was sent to Mason Methodist Sunday School, but perhaps did not go so often, as he never got the chicken dinner promised to children with good attendance. During his time in high school, in 1914-15, Clayton's mother had a stroke, and Clayton left school to work at Peoples Store. When his mother died in 1917, both Clayton and his father went to live with an uncle and aunt who lived on Tacoma Avenue. After a stint at Peoples Store, Clayton found employment selling car parts.

His father bought a Model-T Ford, which might have cost \$400. There was a gas tank under the front seat. Fuel was measured by a yardstick, every inch representing a gallon. They called it planetary transmission. There were dirt roads, of course, and some paved. A common sign warned: "\$25 fine for driving over this bridge faster than a walk."

In 1920 the family moved back to Washington Street, living with Clayton's cousin and wife and little girl. They lived there until 1928. Later, Clayton would have a long career with Tacoma City Water.

Clayton remembered the 1920s as all in all a pleasant life, untroubled by great events, moving along in a routine of congenial work and leisure.

Clayton Rubidge died on November 21, 1993, having seen most of a century of life in Tacoma.

## Furniture Manufacturing in Tacoma

*(Continued from page 5)*

Market Street. While it only employed seven workers, its reputation for high-quality mattresses ensured a steady clientele.

Despite the strong economy, West Coast Chair at 702 E 26th Street suffered from management issues, outdated production processes, and changing tastes. By 1952 it faced closure, and local business leaders from other furniture manufacturers intervened to preserve the company. Through their help, West Coast Chair secured a contract with Tacoma Schools to supply 6,300 desks, saving 40 jobs. Meanwhile, local competitor Northwest Chair Company emerged from the war with a plan for the future. Its wartime contracts added molded plywood to its manufacturing capabilities, which it repurposed for civilian furniture products. Among the items produced at Northwest Chair were chairs for grade schools, dropleaf tables, and matched dinette sets. Veneered plywood was the material it used in new lines of modern living room furniture, and a steam wood bender, the only one on the West Coast, enabled the manufacture of designs in demand in the 1950s. By 1956 Northwest Chair products were available in more than 1,500 retail outlets.

George W. Slyter and Sons, formerly the Washington Parlor Furniture Company, also went through a postwar expansion, building a new facility at 3110 S Cedar Street. Its main output evolved into "occasional chairs" for use throughout the home. Slyter also expanded its sales range to the Midwest, producing 25,000 upholstered chairs with 60 employees in 1951.

### New Entries in the Field

Joining the longstanding companies, new manufacturers entered the field in the 1940s and 1950s. New materials and production techniques spawned companies that put the skills of experienced furniture craftspeople to new purposes. For example, the advent of supermarkets in the 1940s and 1950s created demand for shelving and checkout stations. In 1945 William Sutherland began Sutherland Store Engineering and Fixture Company at 4540 S Adams Street. Using readily available plywood, laminate, and plastic finishes, Sutherland produced fixtures for stores throughout the West, employing more than 140 workers by 1954.

Another manufacturer that followed a similar model was Educators Manufacturing Company, which began as a wholesale distributor in 1948. The nationwide increase in school-age children and rapid expansion in school construction created a demand for standardized modular fixtures for classrooms. In 1951 Educators acquired a small Tacoma startup called Furniture Arts Inc., formed in 1950 as a worker-owned cooperative and began producing plywood custom cabinetry for

schools. By 1957 the company outgrew its factory at 725 East 25th Street and built a new manufacturing facility near the Port of Tacoma. The new plant opened in 1958 and expanded in 1962. By then, Educators supplied classroom fixtures throughout the country.

Tacoma's pioneer mattress manufacturer, Carman Manufacturing Company, also grew in the postwar era. Over the years Carman added other products to its line including early-American-style bedroom and dining-room furniture as well as china cabinets. Carman sold its furniture division to Furniture Arts in 1950, and then expanded its Spring Air mattress-production line, consolidating its Seattle and Tacoma operations.

Buffelen Furniture entered the postwar era making high-end furniture. Despite its woodworking origins, the Buffelen factory began outsourcing its frame construction to other manufacturers in town, dedicating its factory to turning out upholstered products. However, by 1955 sales were in steep decline due to changing tastes. When Buffelen's shareholders decided to sell out, its workers came together to buy the company and continue operation as a co-op. Over time Buffelen modified its product lines to become financially stable.

Among the more substantial firms that launched in this period was Hamilton Manufacturing Company, later National Church Furniture Company. Retired General W. B. Hamilton (1898-1995) agreed to head a committee to acquire new furnishings for his church. When he discovered there were few options for suppliers, he led an investment group that started its own and opened shop at 1515 South Tacoma Way. Early clients included Tacoma's Annie Wright Schools, county and federal courts, and Whitworth College.

In addition, a number of smaller startups also came into being in this era, to take advantage of the manufacturing boom. Blancher Kay was one such startup, manufacturing occasional tables for a time in the late 1940s. Far West Furniture Company began in 1946 as a co-op with seven employee co-owners building unfinished frames sold to other manufacturers. They also built commercial fixtures for restaurants including the Poodle Dog in Fife and the Olympus Hotel. Another firm, Durobilt Furniture and Upholstery Company, began in 1950 reconditioning old-fashioned "overstuffed" home furnishings. By 1960 it relocated to the former home of the Reliance Lumber company at 323 Puyallup Avenue.

### Changing Fortunes

Multiple factors led to a decline in Tacoma's furniture industry by the late twentieth century. The city's expanding role as a major import hub and the advent of containerized shipping at the Port of Tacoma in 1970

*(Continued on page 11)*

## Furniture Manufacturing in Tacoma

(Continued from page 10)

were part of America's larger shift toward outsourcing manufacturing overseas. As the flush economic times of the 1940s and 1950s transitioned toward economic recession and deindustrialization, the public's taste in furnishings reflected a desire to economize where possible. Inexpensive imports sold in chain retail outlets began replacing more durable furnishings that earlier consumers had purchased as family heirlooms to be passed down to descendants.

Rising energy and lumber prices also impacted Tacoma's furniture industry as they did other fields. Shipping costs climbed during the oil shortages of the 1970s and raw materials became increasingly scarce. Not only were old-growth forests becoming depleted from decades of cutting, new regulations protecting existing stands on public lands further limited local supplies of furniture-grade lumber.

Finally, greater acceptance by consumers of products made of other materials, such as steel, aluminum, engineered wood products (particle board), and plastics caused a decrease in demand for refined "classic" wood furniture. While some of Tacoma's manufacturers made forays into manufacturing using new materials, manufacturers outside the United States also had easy access to these materials, negating Tacoma's early advantage in access to resources.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s these forces led to downsizing, business closures, and consolidations, dissipating Tacoma's former leadership as a furniture-manufacturing center. The larger plants including Harmon and Carman downsized as demand fell. Harmon eventually refocused its production on custom office furniture. In the 1990s Carman moved its factory to Thurston County to reduce costs and focus on its most profitable lines. Others, such as National Church Furnishings, also moved away from Tacoma in pursuit of lower labor and land costs.

Junior Line's fate was typical of the trends toward consolidation and downsizing. By 1969 it was purchased by Los Angeles based Nathan Goldman Company and folded into that larger firm. Magnuson Furniture of Kent in south King County bought Slyter Chair, Inc., which continued until 1993 when it closed due to inability to compete with imports. Declining demand also prompted Buffelen to return to its roots as a custom door manufacturer. Educators Manufacturing became part of E. F. Hauserman Company of Cleveland, Ohio. By 1989 Hauserman was no longer in business.

While large-scale manufacturing waned, smaller firms filled the small ongoing demand for locally produced custom furniture, mirroring furniture production in Washington's early days. One example was Restmore Mattress, originally established in 1917. In 1977 Bob

Sinclair, grandson of founder Ted Kronlund (1884-1956), purchased the struggling company and returned it to its roots, producing high-end custom mattresses. By 1997 its five employees produced only 3,000 units per year and reupholstering heirloom furniture accounted for 30 percent of business. Another firm, Custom Craft Fixtures, Inc., began in the 1950s producing medium-range products. Its transition to premium furniture for residences and commercial customers also helped it avoid competition from imports.

### Legacy Persists

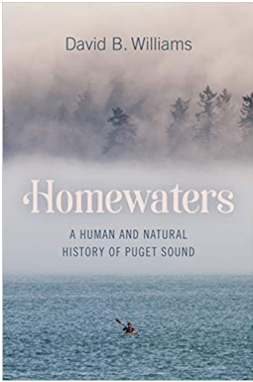
By the second decade of the twenty-first century, furniture making in Tacoma was mainly done by smaller custom builders with few employees. To give a boost to these small concerns and other artisans, Spaceworks, an organization launched in 2010, began helping craftspeople occupy underutilized spaces in Tacoma. In 2015 Rick Semple and Jori Adkins loaned Spaceworks the former Durobilt factory at 323 Puyallup Avenue that they had renovated to house custom furniture makers. Tenants included RePly, making tables, stools, and boxes from salvaged plywood; Wane and Flitch, manufacturing woodslab tables and benches; and Birdloft, rehabilitating mid-century upholstered furniture.

Tacoma's years as a major furniture-manufacturing center supported thousands of family-wage jobs and contributed significantly to the city's economic development. The confluence of abundant raw materials and power, ease of shipping, and a community of skilled woodworkers enabled Tacoma's furniture industry to flourish. While large-scale production of furniture in Tacoma has all but vanished in recent decades, a legacy of fine-furniture making persists on a smaller scale. In addition, many of the substantial buildings that formerly housed Tacoma's furniture-making giants now serve as homes to a new generation of businesses and organizations. The former Harmon buildings on Pacific Avenue are now the center of the University of Washington's Tacoma campus. As these buildings find new purpose as centers of business and social life, they continue to remind us of Tacoma's deep roots as an important center of America's furniture industry.

*Edward Echtle has a lifelong passion for Pacific Northwest history. He holds an MA in US History from Western Washington University, with extensive experience in ethnic relations, immigration, labor and industrial research. He served on the Thurston County Historic Commission, Olympia Heritage Commission and on the Tacoma Landmarks Commission. Currently Edward serves on the board of the Olympia Historical Society & Bigelow House Museum.*



# Explore Tacoma History With Books and Trivia



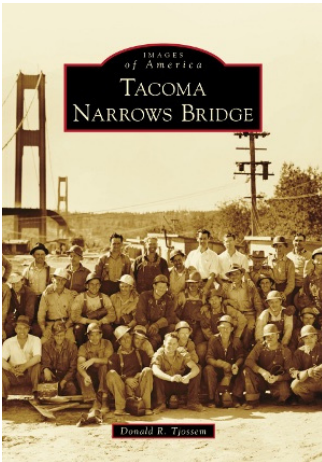
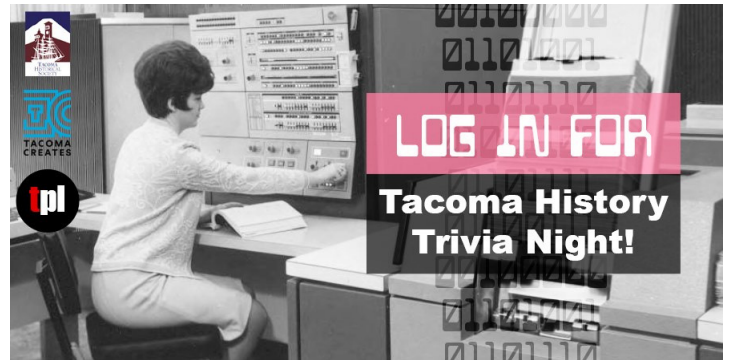
Please join us for our June virtual meeting, as THS Communications Manager Kim Davenport interviews David B. Williams, author of the new book *Homewaters*. Williams uncovers human and natural histories in, on, and around the Sound.

The presentation premieres on **Monday, June 14 at 7pm at [www.tinyurl.com/Homewaters](http://www.tinyurl.com/Homewaters)**

Tacoma Historical Society is pleased to partner with Tacoma Public Library for **Tacoma History Trivia Night on Wednesday, June 23, from 6-7pm.**

All are welcome to join this free event, which will quiz you on geography, oddities, structures, sports teams, and other bits of past and present Tacoma history.

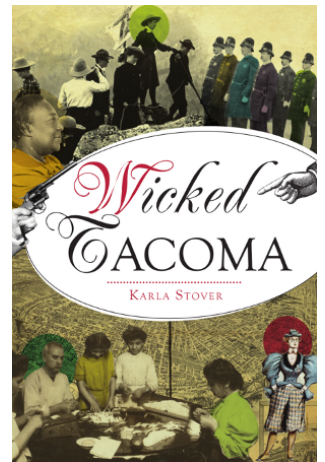
Register here: [tinyurl.com/TacHistoryTriviaNight](http://tinyurl.com/TacHistoryTriviaNight)



In early July, Tacoma Historical Society will celebrate the release of two new local history books.

First, on **Saturday, July 10**, from 1-2pm, join us at the THS Museum for a book signing with Karla Stover, author of ***Wicked Tacoma***.

Then, on **Monday, July 12**, at 7pm, we will host our first in-person monthly meeting in over a year, with featured speaker Don Tjossem, author of ***Tacoma Narrows Bridge***.



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